



What About . . .

Islam

What is Islam and who are the Muslims?

The word “Islam” comes from an Arabic word, *salama*, that has a double meaning: “to surrender” and “to be at peace.” A “Muslim” is a person who surrenders his entire life to the will of Allah.

A sincere, devout Muslim is a person of deep religious conviction and faith, not unlike a devout Christian. Negative stereotypes of Muslims in the Western world are partially due to the fact that our culture has become so secular that people have a hard time understanding anyone who holds to religious beliefs strongly.

As of 1995, there are approximately one billion Muslims in the world. There are about five million Muslims in the United States.

How did Islam begin?

Muhammad, an Arabian trader, became familiar with Christianity and Judaism as a result of his work as a camel driver. Muhammad was deeply troubled by the status of religion and morality among his people. In the year 610 a.d., he claimed that the angel Gabriel revealed to him the name of the one and only true god, “Allah.” At that point, Muhammad’s career as the founder of Islam began. Islam spread rapidly through Muhammad’s military conquests.

What do Muslims believe?

Above everything else, a Muslim believes that: “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet.” This motto, called the *Shahadah*, is used in every aspect of Muslim life. The sacred book of Islam is the *Koran* (often spelled *Qur’an*), which is believed to be the record of Allah’s revelations to Muhammad. Muslims believe in Allah’s angels, in Allah’s books and in Allah’s messengers and prophets (Jesus is considered one of Allah’s prophets). Most Muslims also believe that Allah predestines people to go either to heaven or hell. Muslims believe in a paradise after death for those who are worthy, that is, those who have adequately fulfilled Allah’s requirements and are chosen by Allah. They believe that Muslims may spend some time in hell, but will eventually end up in paradise. Muslims believe all who do not worship Allah, following the five “pillars” of Islam, will be cast into hell when they die.

What are the five most important practices of Islam?

Everyone who claims to be a Muslim is expected to follow the “Five Pillars of Islam” and therefore to:

1. Daily recite the *Shahadah*.
2. Pray five times every day facing Mecca—at morning, noon, mid-afternoon, after sunset and before going to sleep.
3. Give alms. The Muslim is expected to give 2.5 percent of his income annually and to give other alms directly to the poor and for other needs.
4. Fast during the holy month of Ramadan.
5. Make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during one’s life.

Are there differences among Muslims?

Each national group of Muslims has a distinct culture and traditions. While the five pillars of Islam are common throughout Islam, there are three major groups of Muslims. Ninety percent of the world’s Muslims are either *Sunni* or *Shi’ite*¹ Muslims, who believe that Allah is eternal and that the *Koran*, is also eternal. They believe that Allah’s most important characteristic is omnipotence. They believe that because man has a free will, Allah rewards and punishes according to man’s behavior. Approximately 90% of Muslims are *Sunni*.²

The other group of Muslims are *Shi’ite* Muslims. While by far a minority group within Islam, *Shi’ite* Muslims have captured much media attention because many³ major terrorist organizations that claim to be Muslim are associated with the *Shi’ite* branch of Islam. For instance, *Shi’ite* Muslims predominate in the country of Iran. *Shi’ite* Muslims trace their origin to the death of Muhammad’s son, Ali. They have added to the creed of Islam, “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet,” the phrase, “And Ali (the first *Imam*) is Allah’s confidant.” They also have added a sixth pillar to Islam, namely, “*Jihad*” or “holy war.” This concept is understood to refer not just to literal warfare, but also to the effort to spread the *Koran*, and hence Islam, throughout the world.

Are there any similarities between Christianity and Islam?

Like Christians, Muslims have a profound sense of the presence of the Deity in their lives. They believe that Allah is totally in control and believe it is their duty to submit completely to his will. Like Christians, Muslims try to live according

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to clear moral codes of right and wrong, and want the same for their children and for their societies. Muslims are interested in supporting traditional morality in regard to issues such as marriage, sexuality, abortion, homosexuality and the break down in the family. In these ways, there are similarities between Christians and Muslims.

Do Christians and Muslims believe in the same God?

Christians know and believe in the Holy Trinity, that is, one God who has revealed Himself as being three equal, yet distinct, persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Islam rejects the Trinity and insists on belief in “Allah.” Muslims believe that the doctrine of the Trinity is blasphemous idolatry. Therefore, it is important to understand that when Muslims use the word “God,” in English, they are referring to Allah, the subject of the *Koran*, and are most certainly not referring to the Holy Trinity, when they use the word “God.” One must be a bit cautious in making this point, simply because among Arabic speaking Christians, “Allah” is the word used for “God” in Arabic translations of the Bible. The point to be made is that Christians and Muslims may use similar words, but don’t mean the same thing when they speak of “God.”

What do Muslims believe about Jesus?

Muslims have great respect for Jesus, believing Him to be the prophet who announced the coming of Allah’s greatest prophet, Muhammad. Muslims even believe that Jesus was sinless, born of a virgin and did many miracles, but only because he was one of Allah’s prophets.

Christians believe, teach and confess that Jesus was not just a prophet, but actually the Son of God, true God and true Man, sent by the Father to be the world’s Redeemer. Muslims do not believe that Jesus died and rose again from the dead to win our salvation. Muslims generally respect Christians as “People of the Book” and do not view them with the same displeasure that they view persons who are atheists or agnostics.

How do Islam and Christianity differ over salvation?

Above all other differences, this is the most important. Christians believe that salvation is a gift of love from God—a gift earned for us by our Savior, Jesus Christ, who willingly came into this world of sin and death, living perfectly in our place, fulfilling all of God’s demands, giving up His life as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, and then finally rising from the dead as the complete victor over sin, death and Satan. Forgiveness of sins is a gift from God and cannot be earned. Christians know God to be their loving heavenly Father, a concept that is nearly unknown among most Muslims, who do not speak of a personal relationship with Allah, even though they

are very much aware of his constant presence and his control over their lives.

Muslims believe that they can be saved if they follow the five pillars of Islam well enough, and thus earn the favor and blessing of Allah. But they can never be certain or confident of their eternal salvation. Christians who have converted from Islam describe how liberating it was for them to come to know and believe in the true God of love and kindness, who gives them forgiveness, life and salvation as a gift because of what His Son, Jesus Christ, did for them.

How can Christians reach out to Muslims?

Discussions about religion with Muslims should not be one-sided. Christians must be willing to listen respectfully and learn about the faith of Islam. Christians should pray that God will touch the heart of their Muslim friends and neighbors and make them open to the Gospel. In many cases, the best opportunity for outreach comes when Muslims move into our communities and neighborhoods. Rather than trying to engage Muslims in heated debate (which generally is unsuccessful), Christians can reach out through meaningful friendships and relationships with Muslims, demonstrating what Christian love, compassion and forgiveness is all about. As is usually the case, a Christian’s lifestyle can go a long way toward helping Muslims at least to consider the possibility of the Christian faith. On the other hand, if Muslims witness behaviors that are unloving and reflect a prejudice against them this can turn them away from Christianity.

When opportunities for discussion about religion arise, Christians need to stick to the most important issues. God is a God of love and mercy, who gives us forgiveness freely, as a gift, because of Jesus, who is the Son of God, not merely a human prophet. Encourage Muslims to read the New Testament for themselves. Most Muslims know Jesus only from what little is said about Him in the *Koran*.

What resources are available to help us reach out to Muslims?

A short presentation on Islam is *How to Respond to The Muslims*, by Ernest Hahn. A longer treatment of Islam is available in the respectful and sensitive presentation of the Muslim world view by Roland Miller in his book *Muslim Friends, Their Faith and Feelings: An Introduction to Islam*. Both books are available from Concordia Publishing House.

— Dr. A. L. Barry, President
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

¹Changed from “Shia” to “Shi’ite” for consistency

²Sentence added for clarity

³Changed from “most” to “many” to reflect recent developments